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RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CHENNAI 000278

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: BY-ELECTIONS SEND MIXED POLITICAL SIGNALS IN SOUTH INDIA

REF: CHENNAI 223

¶11. (SBU) Summary: The states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka held by-elections on August 18 to fill five legislative assembly seats in each state. Tamil Nadu's ruling alliance of the DMK and Congress parties stomped the opposition, winning all five seats handily. In Karnataka, the BJP increased its majority in the legislative assembly by winning two seats, but the state's opposition parties teamed up to hand the BJP its first electoral setback in the state in several years. A 25-year-old Congress candidate won over an incumbent BJP minister, marking the first time in state history that a sitting minister has lost a by-election. Although by-elections to state legislatures might not gain much attention elsewhere, they are critical events for local political leaders, who are vying for control of states significantly larger than most countries. End Summary.

DMK and Congress leave no doubts in Tamil Nadu

¶12. (U) With Tamil Nadu's main opposition AIADMK boycotting the polls, probably sensing defeat but publicly claiming that the electronic voting machines can be tampered to favor the ruling party, the DMK/Congress alliance easily won all five by-elections. The DMK took three seats, while Congress won two. (The two parties had agreed not to run candidates against each other, and had settled on the 3/2 split.) Observers and party leaders are giving much of the credit for the victory to the tireless campaigning of Deputy Chief Minister (and son of the Chief Minister) M.K. Stalin, who was overseeing the state's first election since his elevation to the state's number-two job in May (see reftel).

¶13. (U) With the AIADMK on the sidelines, Tamil film actor Vijayakanth's DMDK party came second in all the constituencies, winning more than 22 percent of the votes polled but coming nowhere close to victory. The BJP and the two communist parties (CPM and CPI) contested for several seats, performed pathetically, and lost their deposits. (Candidates in Indian elections are required to post a deposit -- INR 5000, or about USD 100 -- to run for office. If they fail to garner at least five percent of the vote, they "lose their deposit," the ultimate humiliation for a candidate.)

¶14. (U) The DMK now holds a 98-seat plurality in the 234-seat legislative assembly. Combined with the Congress Party's 36 seats, the DMK-Congress alliance maintains a comfortable governing majority. The next legislative assembly elections are slated for ¶2011.

BJP picks up seats, but fails to "win" in Karnataka

¶15. (SBU) The political tea leaves settling out of Karnataka's by-election are a bit more difficult to read. At first glance, the BJP did well. By winning two of the five by-election contests, it added to its majority in the legislative assembly, where it now controls 117 out of 224 seats. It also picked up these two seats in districts formerly headed by Congress Party candidates (In one case,

the incumbent died, leaving an empty seat. The other seat was held previously by Congress Party member Mallikarjun Kharge, now Union Minister for Labor, who resigned the seat to take up his post in the national parliament. This district is noteworthy because it is reserved for scheduled caste candidates. The BJP, generally seen as a high-caste party, typically does not fare well in these "reserved constituencies" so the BJP's victory there may be a sign that it is broadening its appeal in Karnataka.)

¶6. (U) Upon further inspection, however, the election results are not entirely in the BJP's favor. The state's opposition parties -- JDS and Congress -- won three of the five contests. In one of these contests, the JDS easily retained the seat held by H.D. Kumaraswamy (former Chief Minister and son of former Prime Minister Deve Gowda), who resigned his legislative assembly post to run for the national parliament. In the other two contests, "defectors" from the Congress Party and JDS to the BJP were punished by the voters. (India's "anti-defection" law requires legislative assembly members who change parties to re-contest their seats.)

¶7. (SBU) In perhaps the most noteworthy result, the BJP was embarrassed as a sitting minister (V. Somanna, a former Congress Party member who defected to the BJP, lured by the promise of a minister-ship) lost to the Congress Party's 25-year-old Priya Krishna, who became the legislative assembly's youngest member. This was the first time in state history that a sitting minister had lost a by-election. That particular contest also saw heavy campaigning by the JDS -- including Deve Gowda himself -- on the Congress Party candidate's behalf. Many observers are speculating that Congress and the JDS may now cooperate more closely to oppose the BJP in the state, as both recognize that only by working together are they likely to pose an electoral challenge to the BJP

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in the state.

¶8. (U) Regardless of the political spin, the fact remains that the BJP retains a firm command of Karnataka's legislative assembly, now holding 117 of its 224 seats. The Congress Party's share now stands at 74, the JDS controls 27, and 6 independents have seats. The legislative assembly is scheduled to hold full elections again in **¶2013.**

Comment

¶9. (SBU) With May's parliamentary elections now ancient history by local standards, South India's politicians can now focus on what matters most to them -- controlling the systems of patronage and power in these large states (the populations of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka exceed those of France and South Korea, respectively). For many in the South's political elite -- particularly in Tamil Nadu -- state-level politics are significantly more important than what happens in far-off New Delhi, giving these sorts of by-elections far greater weight than many outsiders appreciate.

SIMKIN